

*The Institution of Engineers, Australia: Sydney Division
Engineering Heritage Committee*

Oral History Program: Biographical Notes

Peter John Murray OAM (1929 -)
Mining Engineer

- Birth & Family:** Peter John Murray, Born 20 March 1925, Mosman NSW – second of five children.
- Father, John Joseph Murray in Road Transport management, also a career Army Reserve officer who achieved rank of Major General and became Military and Civilian Administrator of the Northern Territory. Mother, Mary Madeleine (nee Cannon) was from sheep grazing family near Peak Hill.
- Murray married Helen Elizabeth (nee Parry) in February 1949; they had 9 children.
- Education:** Attended Marist Brothers, Mosman, until Intermediate Certificate; then to Marist Brothers College, Darlinghurst, to do Leaving Certificate.
- University of Sydney – Civil Engineering, 1943 to 1947
- Qualifications:** B.E (Civil) University of Sydney 1948
- First Class Certificate of Competency – Mine Manager
- Memberships:** Fellow, Institute of Energy
- Member, Institution of Engineers Australia
- Member, Australian Institute of Mining and Metallurgy
- Member, Mineral Industry Consultants Association
- Lifelong active involvement in Catholic Church organisations and activities.
- Awards:** Medal of the Order of Australia “for Services to the Coal Industry and the Community”
- Work History:** During last two years of the degree course, supported himself by teaching Marine Engineering at Cottenham's Academy in Sydney. On the day he graduated with a Bachelor of Civil Engineering from Sydney University, Murray found work as a Cadet Engineer with the Joint Coal Board, which was actively promoting the entry of graduate engineers into the industry at the time.
- In late 1948 he was appointed as the Mechanical Engineer at the Invincible Colliery at Cullen Bullen, West of Lithgow, just before the start of the 1949 Coal Strike. His first engineering problem involved improving the shoeing of pit horses. At that time coal was being dug using hand-held electric drills, and moved in one-ton skips filled by shovel and hauled by pit horses. Murray's main work was the introduction of mechanised mining methods – Jeffery mining equipment and rail cars hauled by battery locomotive. Also installed new pumping equipment, after the mine was flooded for 3 months in 1949.
- Moved to Bellbird Mine, near Cessnock in the Hunter Valley, in 1952. This mine was working at a depth of 400 metres, over 3km from the mine entrance, using a combination of mechanised and manual methods. Murray worked to improve mine ventilation, and experimented

(unsuccessfully) with a novel method of roof bolting. The mine was closed in 1953, and was subsequently reopened and operated with more modern equipment a number of times.

In 1953, he joined R. W. Miller Pty Ltd, working as Manager of Millfield and Millfield North Colliery. After a year he applied to transfer to the larger, modern Northern Rhondda Colliery, which he managed from 1955 for the next ten years. Adopted a win-win approach to industrial relations, to create good working relationship with miners and unions. He also pioneered the introduction of a 'production bonus', to compensate miners for the increase in production needed to make up for 40% loss of product in a new coal washery.

In 1965, ready for a new challenge, he left R. W. Miller's to become General Manager of C. A. Burgmann, a Newcastle-based manufacturer of water mains fittings and valves, and also items of special equipment for the steel and mining industries. He learned a new range of management skills, from accounting and finance to production management, and marketing the company's products. After five years, when the firm's owners were seeking to sell the business, he arranged a sale to STG Manufacturing, a local manufacturer of similar products.

Returning to R. W. Miller's as Superintendent of Mines, and following the death of Roderick Miller in 1971, Murray was promoted to General Manager Mining. He introduced management techniques new to the coal industry, including costing systems and computerised management systems, employed a specialist coal scientist, and travelled overseas to market the company's products to Japanese steel mills and to purchase modern equipment. His management was based on a principle of 'subsidiarity' – that decisions were made by the people lowest in the hierarchy who were capable to make them, backed up by the 'Yell for Help' policy.

Murray also recognised that in order to survive, R. W. Miller needed to increase its coal resources, and set about achieving this with the Mt Thorley mine in the Hunter Valley and the Curragh mine in Queensland.

In 1980, he opened the Mt Thorley mine, a 'state of the art' open cut mine, which was his initiative and his greatest achievement. The mine was the first opened under the 1979 NSW Environmental Planning and Assessment Act, and pioneered the preparation and application of an environmental impact study as the basis on which the mine facilities were planned and built. Murray also worked successfully to develop good relationships between the Hunter Valley mines and the local population, mainly by effective use of environmental controls and close community consultation.

Murray served for 13 years as the Coal Industry representative on the State Mine Subsidence Board, from 1980 to 1993. Played a role in improving the operation of the Board by introducing computerisation of records.

Was a Director of the State Dockyard in Newcastle, but moves to revive it were frustrated by Ministerial decisions, and it was subsequently shut down.

Murray left R. W. Miller in 1985, after the company was taken over by Howard Smith and a day before it came under the control of their subsidiary, Coal and Allied. He was 60 years old at the time.

Shortly afterwards he became a consultant to Minenco, and at the same time was appointed as a Commissioner of the Australian National Railways, serving for 8 years and helping it to be run as a profitable

business. He also helped Surpac Minex, a software developer, develop an important mining software and consulting business.

Murray's consultancy work covered coal mines in Australia, Indonesia, New Zealand and China with over 110 clients in total, and at the time of interview he was on the Board of Camberwell Coal.

Peter Murray's career in mining spanned a period during which coal mining technology in the Hunter Valley developed from essentially 19th century methods (with some mechanisation, but still using such methods as pit ponies for underground haulage) to the open cut mining on a massive scale that was the norm by the end of the 1990s. He was instrumental in introducing many of the changes that led to the current ways of coal mining.

Prepared by Sarah Szacsvey, August 2004 from oral history interviews conducted by Frank Heimans on 29 April and 19 May, 2004.